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This ethnographic study relates the structural components of the educational system to the processes by which women gain admission, establish an administrative career, and finally advance within its hierarchy. It was found that the "opportunity structure," "power structure," and "sex ratio" were structural components contributing to the absence of women in school administration. (Author)

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THE HIERARCHICAL SYSTEM OF SCHOOL ADMINISTRATION: THE CONTRIBUTIONS OF QUALITATIVE RESEARCH

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The Hierarchical System of School Administration

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ABSTRACT

This ethnographic study relates the structural components of the educational system to the processes by which women gain admission, establish an administrative career, and finally advance within its hierarchy. It was found that the "opportunity structure," "power structure," and "sex ratio" (Kanter, 1976:416) were structural components contributing to the absence of women in school administration.

The Hierarchical System of School Administration: The Contributions of Qualitative Research

The study on which this paper is based began as a study of a female school administrator. Due to the methodology employed, another area of interest arose and this paper reports on the research processes by which certain insights concerning the structure of school administration emerged.

A recurring theme in the study of schools has been its structural components beginning with Waller's (1932) specified administration, teaching, and student components. More recently, Bidwell (1965), Lortie (1969; 1975), Becker (1953), Hanson (1973), and others have focused on describing the relationships established between the three components. Each of the researchers has however, organized his analysis around the teaching component. Another perspective is presented by Callahan (1962) and Carlson (1961; 1962; 1972) in their attempt to describe the behavior of school administrators. They focused on the administrative positions of the superintendent and failed to specify intervening structural components of the organization. Those researchers reporting on the principalship such as Wolcott (1973) do not present structural considerations. Other researchers such as Hills (1963-64) and Hoy & Reese (1974) have conducted studies based on different administrative structural levels within schools. Being concerned with

relationships and functions, their analyses are limited to the immediate levels, rather than with a representation of all hierarchical levels. Studies regarding the relationship between the hierarchical system in school administration and its consequences for upward mobility do not appear available. This paper presents an analysis of the hierarchical system in school administration which became evident after an extensive period of field observation. A secondary consideration specifies the consequences for upward mobility within the described hierarchical system of school administration.

Field methods research has been described as a proper research method for investigating processes, for discovering, and for generating relationships. This paper reports on a study originally focusing on a woman elementary school principal. A period of eleven months was devoted to observation, intensive interviewing, and document analysis in a western urban school district consisting of a central office staff of twenty, twenty five elementary schools, five junior high schools, and five high schools. Because the study centered on the woman principal all of the field work began at the woman principal's school site. Later, observation and interviewing radiated to a limited degree across the district. Observation assumed two basic patterns: prolonged school site observations of at least four hour periods and periodic short visits to specific school administrator related events and sites. Interviews were conducted with teachers, teacher aides, clerical staff, support staff, parents, principals, and other school officials. Relevant documents covering district and school policy, state law and institutional decisions were collected and analyzed.

Field methods research permits the observer to see how participants

within an organisation relate to each other and also how the various parts of the organisation interact with each other. By observing the woman principal as she went about her daily work, the researcher was able to identify certain structural components within the school organisation. For example, the researcher was struck by the fact that elementary principals tended to meet together apart from the secondary principals. On closer inspection, a comparison of the agenda items and order of business revealed a distinct difference between the two in the scope, influence, and nature of the relationship to the superintendent and central office staff. Later, an important status difference between the elementary and secondary principalship positions became apparent.

Another aspect which was subsequently revealed was the composition of the various school district business committees. Members of those committees were personally influential and their membership in those committees increased their district wide influence.

Much later, another revelation assumed importance. The informal groups' composition paralleled the status structure. High school principals, line central office position holders and the superintendent were more likely to be members of the same informal groups whereas elementary school principals were not. Furthermore, these groups were highly stable. The composition of the groups rarely varied regardless of the informal setting in which they were located. It was finally determined that the activities in which these informal groups participated strongly encouraged male membership to the exclusion of females. The structure which emerged, then, revealed high school principals as powerful figures among the principals. Among the central office position

holders, those officials primarily responsible for finances and personnel wielded influence while the rest decreased in importance as the programs for which they were responsible decreased in scope, resources, and impact. In summary, certain organizational positions enhanced the likelihood of membership within certain formal school committees, which further increased the likelihood of membership within the school district's informal power groups. Membership in these groups enabled the aspirant to develop important interpersonal relationships and acquire specific types of information which would increase the potential for upward mobility within the school administration hierarchy.

The female administrator upon which this study was based formally held the position of elementary principal. She also held important formal positions in district wide committees. In fact, she was described by many of her teachers and other school employees as spending a lot of time on district business. However, during the period of observation, she was never invited to participate in the informal groups which were composed of the powerful figures. She attributed it to her being an elementary principal. The researcher attributes exclusion in part to the nature of the predominant activities in which these groups engage. The activities which were observed to take place were late Friday afternoon sessions at a local bar, luncheons at neighborhood restaurants, golfing, tennis, and private invitational parties and picnics.

High school principals, then, holding primary power positions located in the school district serve as field strongholds for the superintendent and the central office positions associated with personnel and finance serve

as personal aides to the superintendent. The data reveal that the school district structure consists of the superintendent on top, flanked by the personnel and finance associate superintendents. The high school principals and maybe a central office position holder command the next level of power. These two levels are referred to as the superintendent's cabinet. Women are not likely to be found in the cabinet posts. The other levels of power are, then, more or less diffused among the rest of the central office position holders and elementary principals. Curriculum, instruction and support services are the organizational units.

A case in point illustrating the emergence of an influential central office position is the following. During the period of observation a central office position became potentially powerful due to external forces requiring the publication of school performance records. At the time the position was being held by a woman. Subsequently, the position holder retired and a male succeeded to that position. Today, that position in surrounding school districts is predominantly held by men.

Kanter (1976) describes the structural components of the organization in terms of "power, opportunity and composition ration." In analyzing the hierarchical structure of school organizations, the power positions are likely to be the superintendency, associate superintendents in charge of personnel and finance and the high school principalship positions. The "opportunity" positions may be said to be secondary principalship, secondary vice principalship positions, and those administrative highly visible line positions in the central office. The positions are considered to be "opportunity" positions because they place the individual within the organi-

sational context where information, visibility, interpersonal interaction, and organizational activity are greatest. The "opportunities" are further maximized if the relationships extend to the informal as well as the formal groups.

The "composition ratio" of a particular organizational level also has a bearing on the nature of the position. Those levels primarily staffed by women such as teaching hold less status. As the ratio of men increases, so does the status, therefore in administration the elementary principalship remains low in status and the most likely administrative position to be held by women. Other ascribed characteristics such as race are also reflected in the structure of the schools. Regarding the school district which is being reported upon, during the period of observation, one member of a minority group held a principalship position. He was, however, excluded from the informal group and is no longer in that position. Interview data indicate that members of minority groups have never been members of the informal groups. No woman of a minority group holds an administrative position in the hierarchy of the school district.

Now that the structure of school administration has been described it will be seen how it affects upward mobility for women. As was explained at the beginning of the paper, school administration is distinct from teaching. The careers within each strata are distinct, even though it is expected that school administrators begin their careers by teaching. The second stage of this career requires a departure from teaching into administration. Because teaching is primarily staffed by women while administration is primarily staffed by men, it appears to be simpler and more natural for men than for

women to depart from teaching. For women, the departure means assuming a position normally attributed to men.

The second structural characteristic which results in being a barrier in the upward climb is that if women assume a school administrative position, it is the elementary principalship. This position turns out to be the least powerful position in school administration. The status difference between the elementary and secondary principalship created by differences in salaries, functions and segregation is great enough to restrict women to the elementary principalship. As members of the elementary principalship they run the risk of being excluded from the powerful formal school district committees. This exclusion results in restricted visibility and contact. Later, it leads to exclusion from the informal groups.

Another aspect to the upward climb is the personal support furnished to women aspirants. In this study, it was found that women were more conscious about being sponsored by someone. The woman principal under observation admitted being sponsored by the superintendent. In the daily observation of the woman principal it was noted that she consistently received support from him. The one exception was when she applied for a high school principalship position. The process described below will illustrate the difference between personal and structural influence.

When the woman principal attempted an upward move, the superintendent played a key role. The woman principal applied, as everyone else did, for a high school principalship position. She met with the superintendent who suggested she apply to serve as principal of the continuation school program. The woman principal thought it would be better to apply as a high school

principal. If unsuccessful, she would reconsider the continuation school position. Someone else was appointed to the principalship position. She was then invited by the superintendent to again reconsider the continuation school position. The position carries lower salary than the high school principalship, the hours of operation are irregular, and the person presently in charge was not likely to be transferred elsewhere. The woman principal declined to take the position unless she was given full control of the school. The superintendent promised to speak to the director of continuing education in order to restructure the programs.

A few days later a letter arrived from the superintendent stating that the attempts to restructure the program under continuing education were proceeding. The present structure and the individuals responsible for each program were detailed and she was assured that further information regarding subsequent reorganization would be relayed to her. However, under the present conditions, the superintendent knew that she would not be receptive to the position. The woman principal studied the letter. The structure of continuing education programs consists of separate programs administered by individuals whom the members of the school district consider as "flunkies." She said, "Everybody knows all of these guys have been ineffective and have been granted these positions in order to send them out to pasture. I refuse to accept a position alongside of them. I'll never move any further. Besides, the director of all the programs has been considered a troublemaker and at one time may have held some influence in the school district. Maybe, the superintendent would rather not test that power by insisting I be given a program all to myself. I prefer to remain at Elementary School."

The role of the superintendent in the quest for a higher position was crucial. However, the woman principal restricted to the elementary principalship and to membership in a few formal committees was unable to exert the influence and support necessary in a promotional move. The personal relationship between the superintendent and aspirant did not have the influence and power presumbed to be available in a structural sense.

The use of field methods research in the investigation of school administration uncovered several important aspects. First, the structure of school administration is hierarchical accompanied by differing characteristics. The elementary principalship differs from the high school principalship. Positions within the central office are likewise hierarchically distinct. Second, the hierarchical structure contributes to the exclusion of women from school administration. Because the composition of school administration is predominantly male and because a departure from teaching is required, females find school administration restrictive. Third, because those women who do enter school administration are likely to begin at the elementary principalship position, and because it is the least influential administrative position, women from the beginning confront restrictions to opportunity. Fourth, the aspect most often neglected in research has been the consideration of informal processes in the organization requirements for upward mobility. Conducting a field methods research study provided a means for detecting the parallel structures of the formal as well as the informal groups in school administration.

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